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Labor's Longest War: Trade Unionists and the Vietnam Conflict

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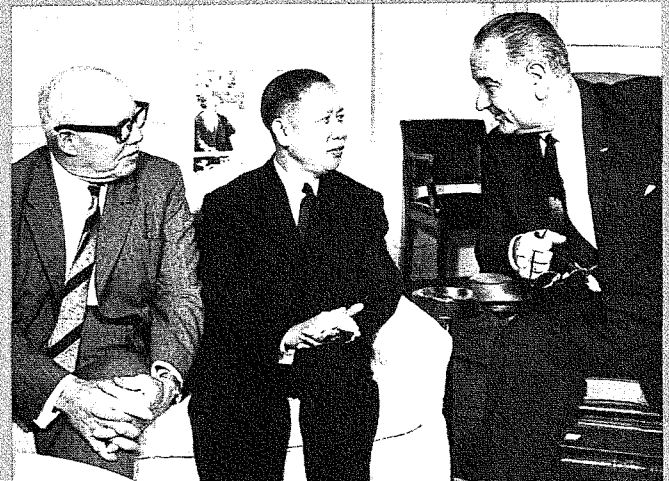
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LABOR'S LONGEST WAR



Trade Unionists and the Vietnam Conflict

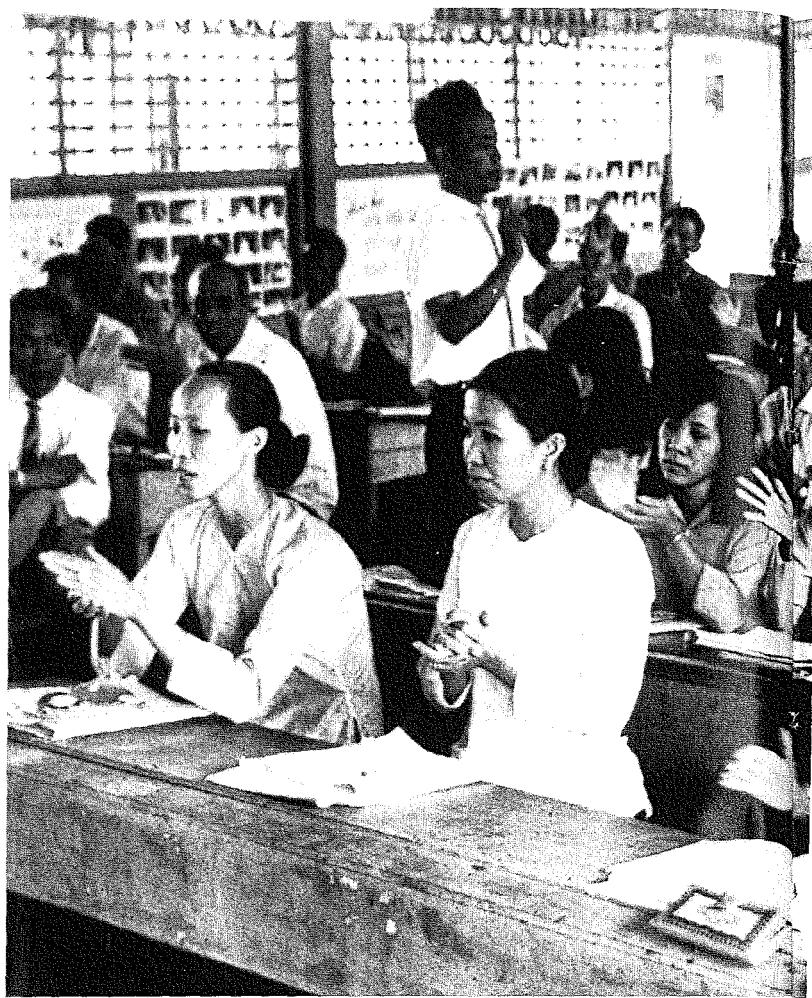
Above: Lyndon Johnson meeting in the Oval Office of the White House with Tran Quoc Buu, leader of the South Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT) and George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, May 20, 1964. Buu told Johnson that the Vietnamese people are "tired of empty promises and that the new government must live up to its assurance of economic and social progress." Photograph by Abbie Rowe. Left: The seafood market at the docks of Phan Thiet, 1968. The city was the headquarters of the CVT-affiliated Fishermen Union. Responding to the needs of Vietnamese workers, the CVT organized a wide variety of workers, including pedi-cab drivers, textile workers, and plantation workers.

LEFT: GEORGE MEANY MEMORIAL ARCHIVES, #1679 / RIGHT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES, 79AR8610-B

IN MAY 1964, THE AFL-CIO LEADERSHIP INVITED the head of the South Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT), Tran Quoc Buu, to Washington and arranged a one-on-one meeting with President Lyndon Johnson. At the White House, Buu told Johnson that the “missing link in the present Vietnamese chain of events,” was a free Vietnamese labor movement capable of addressing the “daily hardships” suffered by the country’s workers. AFL-CIO President George Meany, who also attended the Oval Office meeting, and Buu both hoped to convince the President not only of the necessity of U.S. intervention—but more importantly the necessity of the right kind of intervention. What the two union leaders envisioned was an American engagement that would place equal weight on economic, social, and political reform as on the military struggle. Impressed, Johnson readily agreed that the problems of South Vietnam were as much political as military in nature.¹

The Buu meeting was the most visible example of AFL-CIO on-going assistance to the Vietnamese labor movement. As the war in Asia expanded and divided the country, it proved to be a costly ordeal for American union leaders and union members. Despite public allegiance to governmental endeavors in Vietnam over several presidential administrations, Meany and his supporters tried to pursue independent policies and programs in the troubled Southeast Asian country. American labor hoped—unrealistically as it turned out—that if it could build strong independent unions in Vietnam, a middle way would be constructed between the repression of the South Vietnamese state and the horrors of communism.

The American labor movement was not a latecomer to the problems in Southeast Asia. In the early 1950s, the AFL was eager to help the Third World construct free trade unions and other institutions as part of its anti-communist campaign. At a planning session for the newly formed International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1950, Irving Brown, the European-based AFL representative, pressed the organization to send a delegation to French Indo-China, insisting that he could “think of no more pressing task than organizing in Southeast Asia.” A preliminary ICFTU task force that included American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Secretary-Treasurer Gordon Chapman and United Mine Workers of America



From twenty-two provinces, men and women of the CVT's Fishermen Union attend a twenty-five day training seminar, February 1969.

(UMWA) official John Brophy swept through Southeast Asia later that year. Their Asian survey included a brief visit to Vietnam. There, the group saw evidence of a nascent labor movement. Officials of the French colonial government assured the delegation that trade union rights soon would be extended to all Vietnamese workers.²

Labor issues long had been of concern to the Vietnamese nationalist movement. Their French colonial overlords had created some of the worst labor conditions in the world—especially on the country’s rubber plantations, where workers toiled in virtual slavery. Influenced by Chinese and Soviet communists, the language of labor exploitation quickly took hold of the nationalist movement. The future leader of South Vietnam’s labor movement, Buu, was well schooled in such language. He eagerly joined the Viet Minh movement, fighting French colonial control and, when captured by the French, serving prison time alongside future leaders of North Vietnam. By the late 1940s, however, Buu and others grew disillusioned with the violence and excesses of the Viet



Minh, a movement they came to suspect had more to do with communism than genuine nationalism. Although a Buddhist himself, Buu began working with French Catholic trade unionists to build an independent labor movement for native workers—activity strictly forbidden by French colonial law. Buu eagerly welcomed the American visitors in 1950, hoping that they might provide leverage as he dealt with French officials.

Over the next several years, as the French struggled to retain control over Vietnam, colonial authorities allowed Buu's movement increasing freedom. In 1953, he christened his now-legal organization the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor. The organization quickly grew, but the Viet Minh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 put the CVT's progress in jeopardy. At the international Geneva Conference dealing with Southeast Asia that same year, the AFL advocated the immediate end of French colonial rule and the formation of a genuinely nationalist army to fight the Viet Minh.³ When the conference ignored the AFL's efforts and divided Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel, George Meany, president of the AFL, bitterly assailed the action as "appeasement" on "a world scale which would make Munich pale into insignificance."⁴

As a result of the Geneva Conference decision, the

CVT faced grave challenges. Thousands of its members worked above the seventeenth parallel and feared retribution from the Viet Minh. Buu called on international labor for help resettling trade unionists fleeing from the north. For a time, hundreds of refugees, with no other place to go, camped out in the CVT headquarters in Saigon. By 1956, as the division of Vietnam became a reality, the newly created AFL-CIO struggled to aid the CVT, now centered in South Vietnam. But with limited resources and other pressing labor situations around the world, American labor could offer little help. The Eisenhower administration, meanwhile, seeking to hold the line on military and foreign aid spending, resisted AFL-CIO calls for U.S. government support for the CVT. Nevertheless, in 1956, the U.S. Operations Mission in Saigon did hire Jodie Eggers (formerly of the CIO's International Woodworkers of America) as its labor advisor. Eggers went to work immediately establishing strong bonds with the CVT. The new labor advisor even spent his weekends building homes for resettled CVT members. Despite the promise he saw in the new organization, soon he reported tensions between the CVT and the South Vietnamese government of President Ngo Dinh Diem had begun to spiral out of control due to the labor organization's pressure on the government to democratize the country. When the U.S. government reassigned Eggers to Pakistan in 1958, the labor aid program he devised quickly disintegrated but the problems remained.⁵

By the start of the 1960s, rumors swirled throughout Saigon that Buu would be the next in a long line of CVT officials imprisoned by President Diem. In 1961, concerned about the deteriorating situation, Meany dispatched international affairs expert Irving Brown to Saigon. Brown quickly recognized a grave situation. "Unless there is a cleansing of the Augean stables and an introduction of new, hopeful political elements into the regime, the masses, especially the peasants—will not defend the regime no matter what this government or the USA says," concluded Brown. Meeting with Buu and other members of the CVT, he became increasingly convinced that the CVT was just the sort of organization that could help democratize the nation.⁶ Returning to his office in Paris, Brown met frequently over the next two years with Vietnamese exiles opposed to Diem. He used



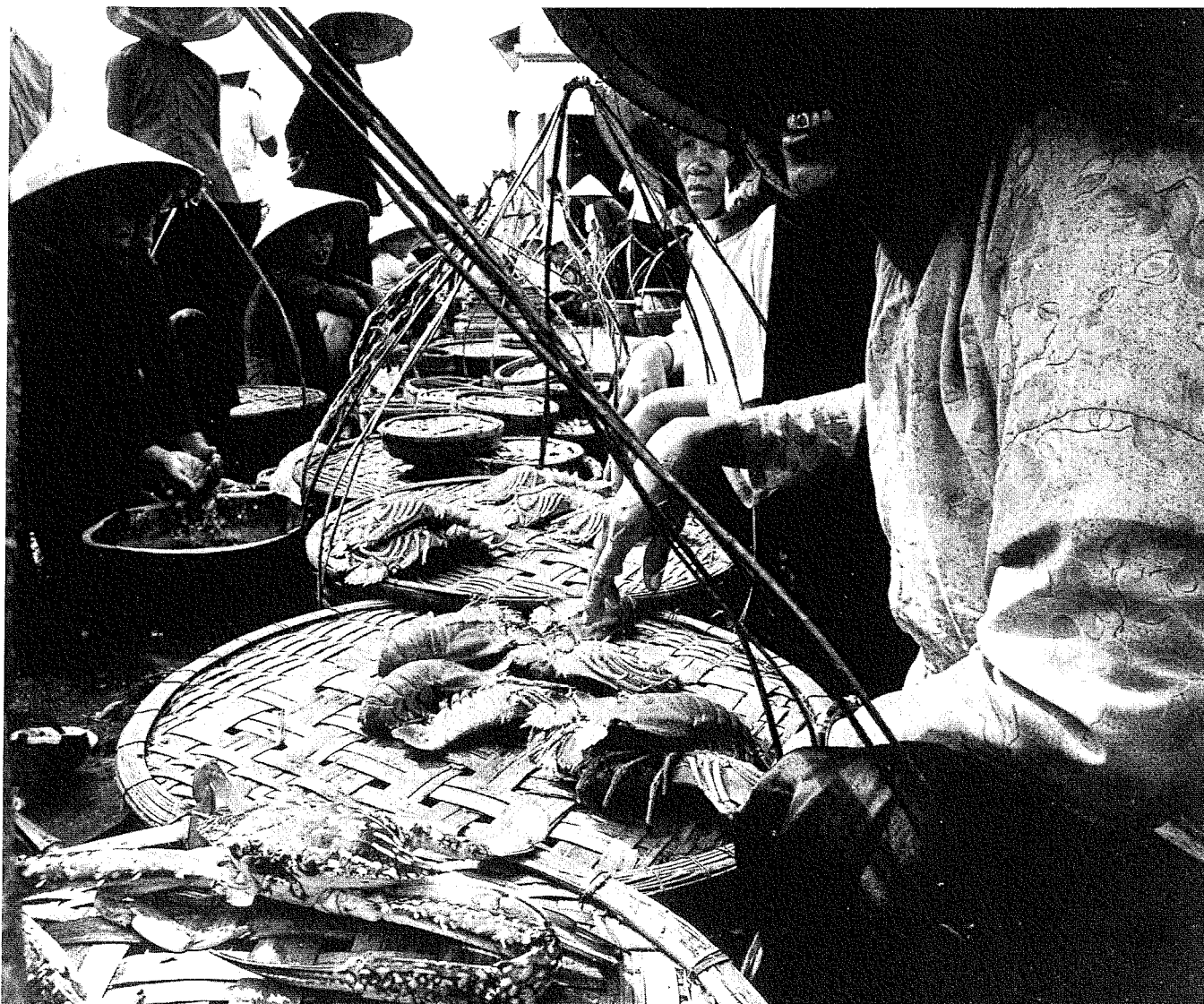
GEORGE MEANY MEMORIAL ARCHIVES, #1685

Members of Transport Workers' Union, Local 500 of Pan American Airways in Miami, Florida, prepare to load 3,000 Christmas gifts for soldiers in Vietnam made possible by union-raised contributions. This was one of numerous union projects such as the Communication Workers of America-sponsored "Call Mom," which provided free telephone service to G.I.s in Vietnam.

his contacts to arrange for meetings between dissidents and high-ranking U.S. officials. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, while still cautious, Buu grew more outspoken in his criticisms of Diem. In early November 1963, a coup led by South Vietnamese generals finally ended the oppressive Diem regime. But the CVT remained vulnerable and Buu went into hiding to avoid possible arrest, as further coups and leadership changes brought only greater instability. Seeking to provide Buu with much needed leverage and eager to bring the plight of the CVT to the attention of

President Johnson, the AFL-CIO brought Buu to Washington, D.C. in 1964.

Buu's meeting with Johnson emboldened the CVT leader, who returned to a South Vietnam increasingly descending into chaos. Protests against the government had virtually paralyzed the capital city of Saigon. When the South Vietnamese government tried to impose new restrictions on public meetings that would severely hamper labor organizing, Buu announced a general strike to protest the restrictions. George Meany immediately sent Buu a telegram, expressing "our all-out unstinting support to the free and independent workers organized in the CVT under your great leadership." U.S. Embassy officials, however, shared none of Meany's enthusiasm. They worried that the "general strike was an extreme reaction and another example of national indiscipline."⁷ On September 21, 1964, workers throughout Saigon



The seafood market at the docks of Phan Thiet, 1968. During the war years, thousands of Vietnamese fishermen worked the waters of this coastal city and many were members of the CVT's Fishermen Union. Since 1975, however, they can no longer count on the support of an independent trade union.

walked off their jobs and joined in a march to the presidential palace to demand a change in policy. The city was effectively shut down.

Intimidated by the CVT's show of force, the South Vietnamese government agreed to drop restrictions on public gatherings and met other demands. But Buu did not have long to bask in his success. Only weeks after the strike, government officials arrested the CVT president on charges of conspiring in a coup against the South Vietnamese leadership. Meany—infuriated at the arrest—drafted a caustic statement denouncing the government of South Vietnam for its “inhuman and destructive action in trumping up treason charges against Buu.”⁸ The AFL-CIO's pressure paid off, and Buu was acquitted of all charges. Still, it was clear that while the

CVT had potential, it also had enemies. South Vietnamese labor found itself caught awkwardly between the repressive government of South Vietnam and the dangerous insurgent Viet Cong guerrillas, increasingly controlling the countryside. As one CVT official put it, we were “pinched between a mountain and a river.”

Despite the obstacles faced by Vietnamese labor, both the CVT and AFL-CIO felt confident that labor could make a difference in Vietnam—serving as a vehicle for social, economic, and political reform. Thus, in the summer of 1965, when President Johnson made the decision to greatly expand the U.S. role in Vietnam with thousands of American combat troops, the AFL-CIO announced its “unstinting” support for the intervention. American labor leaders reasoned that only U.S. troops could provide the much-needed stability for the south and thwart the communist insurgents who often targeted CVT organizers for retribution.

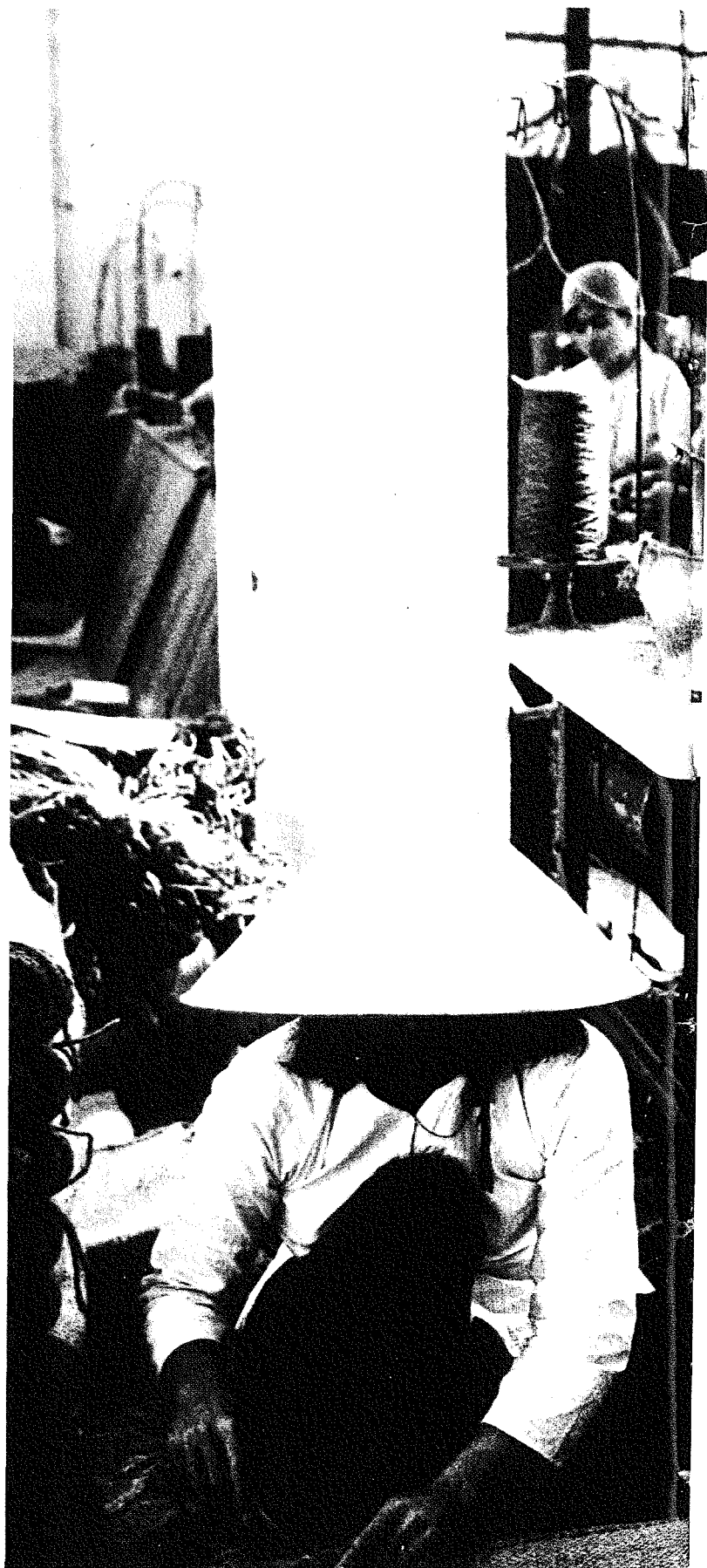
American organized labor, however, was not totally unified in support of Johnson's move. The 1965 AFL-CIO convention showed early evidence of dissention and

division. Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) and president of the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, helped to rewrite a resolution in support of the war that he considered needlessly strident. UAW Vice President Emil Mazey rose to denounce the South Vietnamese government as "a corrupt military dictatorship," unworthy of American support. Student anti-war protesters in the visitor's gallery created a disturbance when Secretary of State Dean Rusk arrived to address the convention. These episodes foreshadowed growing debate within the house of labor and throughout the country.⁹

Over the next several years, the AFL-CIO leadership continued to support the war and seek to build up the CVT in Vietnam. The American intervention created an economic boom in South Vietnam, and the AFL-CIO leaned on the U.S. government to lean on American firms employing hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese workers in order that CVT unions receive recognition. Under these artificially created conditions, CVT unions prospered. Gains were made not only organizing construction and other urban workers, but also among the CVT's rural unions, which included tenant farmers and plantation workers. Inspired by President Johnson's optimistic reports, the AFL-CIO felt confident that the war could be won.

Increasingly, however, with college deferments available to the middle class who could afford ever growing tuition costs, it proved to be the sons of working people who did much of the fighting in Vietnam—and suffered most of the casualties. This accelerated division in the labor movement. Internal polls taken by various unions showed deteriorating support for the war, and anti-war trade unionists were growing more outspoken. On Veteran's Day, November 11, 1967, peace-minded union leaders organized the National Labor Assembly for Peace, a national conference for trade unionists opposed

Workers manufacturing burlap bags in a Saigon factory, March 1970. Although primarily an agrarian country, some light industry existed in Vietnam. The CVT aimed to organize workers in urban industrial and service sectors and in rural areas on plantations and farms. Building unions outside cities proved very dangerous since organizers were likely to encounter the dangerous Viet Cong forces.





NATIONAL ARCHIVES, # 306-MVP-12

to the war. Meany and his supporters considered such actions counterproductive to the war effort and denounced the planners of the conference in no uncertain terms.

The turning point for American labor in Vietnam came, as it did for the rest of the country, in the pivotal year of 1968. The AFL-CIO's hopes that progress would continue in Vietnam and opposition might be held in check at home, quickly collapsed in the early weeks of 1968. General Nguyen Loan, head of South Vietnam's national police force, long had viewed the CVT as a group of troublemakers, whom he unfairly suspected was infiltrated by the communist Viet Cong. In early January 1968, when the CVT-affiliated electrical workers launched a strike against the South Vietnamese government which owned Saigon's major power plant, Loan had had enough. He surrounded the CVT headquarters in Saigon with trucks loaded with armed police, who then marched workers forcibly back to their jobs. Loan also arrested several high-ranking CVT officials as they conducted negotiations in the labor ministry's offices.

The violent strikebreaking infuriated the AFL-CIO. But the federation resisted making a public stand against Loan's actions. CVT leaders had made clear to their American counterparts that South Vietnamese labor must appear an autonomous force, not dependent on outsiders. Such autonomy was deeply valued in a country with a long and painful colonial past. Of course, no such true independence was possible in the complicated and dangerous political environment of South Vietnam, but the legitimacy of an organization like the CVT required it to strive to maintain at least a façade of autonomy. Alongside these concerns, the AFL-CIO feared that any attacks on the South Vietnamese government would play into the hands of anti-war protesters, eager to draw attention to the undemocratic nature of America's allies. Thus the AFL-CIO maintained an awkward public silence on the arrests. To labor's critics, both the CVT and the AFL-CIO appeared impotent in the face of the crisis. Behind the scenes, however, Meany and others pressed the Johnson administration to lean on South Vietnamese officials to address the situation. Finally—just before the Vietnamese New Year holiday of Tet—under pressure from the American ambassador, the South Vietnamese government settled the strike and re-

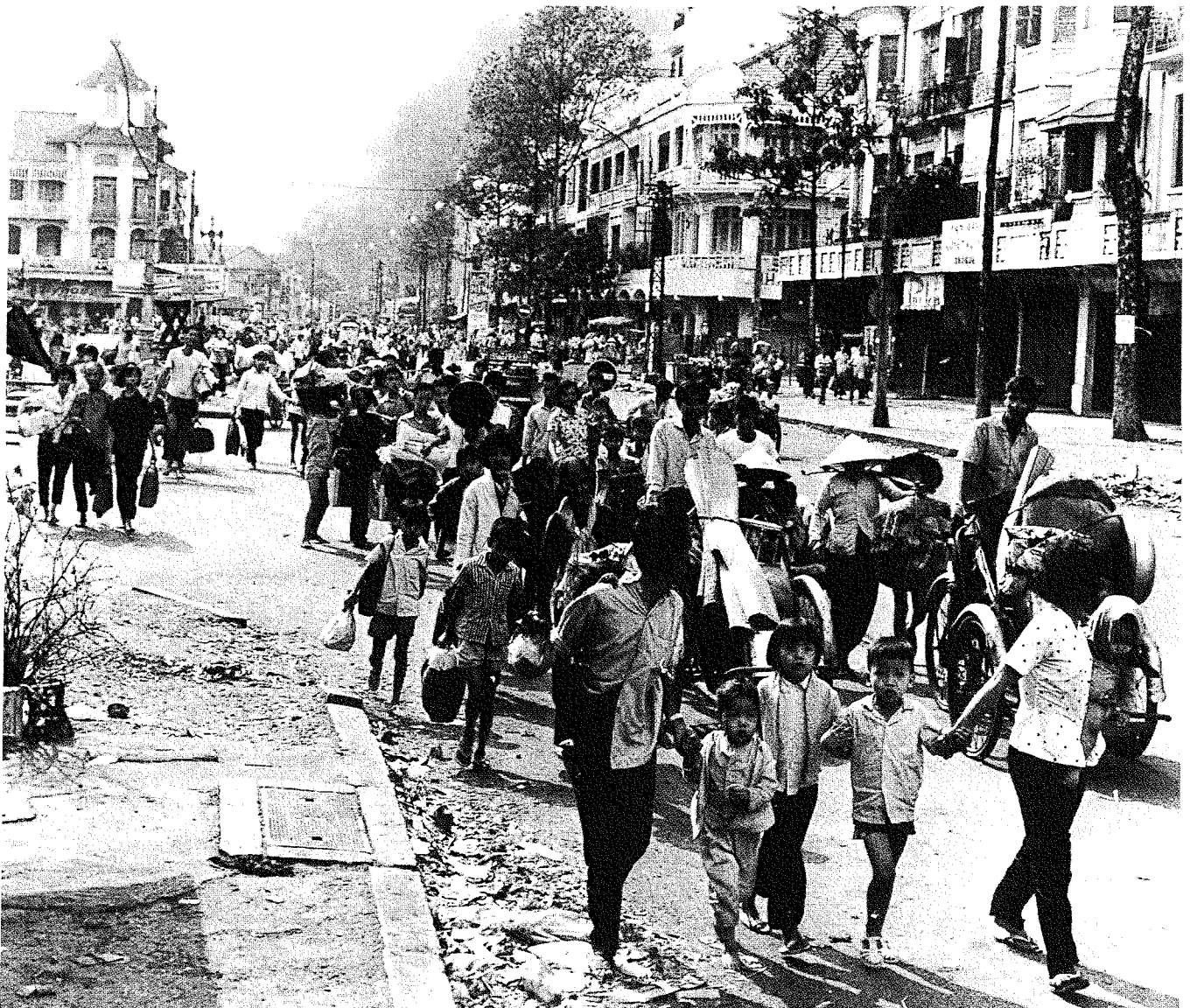
leased the remaining jailed labor leaders.

Only days later, Viet Cong guerillas attacked South Vietnam's major cities, in the process targeting working-class neighborhoods for propaganda campaigns and CVT officials for assassination. Violence destroyed the homes of more than 1,000 members of the CVT. In the midst of the battle, the entire world was allowed a glimpse of the brutality of General Loan, the chief of police, when he summarily executed a suspected terrorist in front of cameramen.¹⁰

In the wake of the attack, the AFL-CIO attempted to put the best face on events, announcing that "the terrorist campaign has only hardened the resolve of Vietnamese labor to resist terror and oppression," and offering emergency funds to help rebuild CVT losses. AFL-CIO International Affairs Department Director Jay Lovestone, however, recognized that, while the Viet Cong maneuver had fallen short of its objective of cracking the South Vietnam regime, the tide had shifted. Lovestone wrote to Meany that the Americans had "underestimated the strength of the enemy." And he acknowledged, "What has happened is no doubt a political blow to us."¹¹

But even the end of the Tet Offensive brought no peace for the CVT. When violence subsided, General Loan rearrested two CVT leaders—including the CVT general secretary. Again the AFL-CIO applied pressure behind the scenes—bluntly informing state department officials that it would publicly condemn the South Vietnamese government unless the jailed labor leaders were released. While the American ambassador managed to gain the release of the general secretary, the other CVT official continued to languish in jail. Finally, the AFL-CIO dispatched its most effective negotiator, Irving Brown, to Saigon. There he arranged a lengthy meeting with General Loan. No doubt Brown, who had a reputation for ruthlessness and CIA ties, was characteristically blunt, perhaps even threatening during the encounter. Forty-eight hours after his confrontation with Brown, Loan released the remaining CVT official in custody.¹²

The release, however, could have brought little satisfaction to either the CVT or the AFL-CIO. The events of the first three months of 1968 did much to dash the accumulated optimism of many years. The arrests and strikebreaking belied the façade of South Vietnamese



Thousands flee from the working-class area of Saigon, known as Cholon, during the Viet Cong guerilla attack during the Tet Vietnamese holiday, January 1968. CVT leaders, including Tran Quoc Buu, maintained high visibility during the Tet Offensive and the insurgents received little support from neighborhoods such as Cholon. The attack did, however, weaken the commitment of the American public to the long overseas war.

democracy that the United States had so patiently and expensively erected. The AFL-CIO's willingness to support President Nguyen Van Thieu's authoritarian government—even if only with silence—suggested a narrow dogmatism to many onlookers. For the CVT, the illusion upon which South Vietnamese labor built much of its success was also greatly damaged.

Things also deteriorated in the U.S. for the AFL-CIO. Under fire from anti-war challengers, President Johnson, with whom labor leaders had grown remarkably close, withdrew from the presidential race in March of 1968. Meany personally appealed to Vice President Hubert

Humphrey to enter the race—to prevent a complete collapse of the liberal anti-communism agenda. Humphrey, burdened by the increasingly unpopular war and suffering through the traumatic and violent Chicago convention, slogged into the general election with few enthusiastic supporters—other than the AFL-CIO. Thanks to the federation's unprecedented devotion of resources, the vice president almost won a very close election. But in the end, Vietnam defeated Humphrey, and the AFL-CIO was now faced with President Richard Nixon.

Despite deep misgivings, Meany moved to establish a working relationship with the new President. The AFL-CIO president, no doubt, appreciated Nixon's hawkish stand on the war, but he had a more particular reason to work with Nixon. In cooperation with the Johnson administration, the AFL-CIO had created the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) in 1968. AAFLI was to be an independent organization to promote free, western-style unions in Asia—particularly in Vietnam,



Some of the 100,000 construction workers, longshoremen, and other workers rally at City Hall and surrounding streets in New York City, chanting "U.S.A. all the way" in support of the military effort in Vietnam, May 20, 1970. Peter J. Brennan, president of the Construction Trades Council of Greater New York and Thomas (Teddy) Gleason, president of the International Longshoremen's Association addressed the crowd. Mindful of the violent confrontation between "hardhats" and "peaceniks" at the same location two weeks earlier, Gleason remarked: "We want peace as much as the others want it, but we want an honorable peace."

where it would work to aid the CVT. The Agency for International Development (AID) was to fund the institution, loosely under the direction of the AFL-CIO. Nixon's support was crucial to maintaining AID funding for AAFLI.

Meanwhile, the never-ending war continued to create division within the ranks of labor's leadership. Walter Reuther, an early supporter of the war, had come to view the engagement as a costly impediment to social progress and, by the time of his death in 1970, had become an outspoken critic of the conflict. That same year, Amalgamated Clothing Workers President Jacob Potofsky lamented that the country was "beset by a host of problems," and the war in Vietnam "underlies practically all our troubles."¹³

At the grassroots level, anti-war sentiment and activity

grew, fueled in large part by the heavy casualty rate and toll taken on the lives of young men from working neighborhoods. Patriotism loomed large in blue-collar households. Many anti-war trade unionists found themselves uncomfortable with the excesses of the peace movement. Flag burnings and disloyal rhetoric offended many of the socially more conservative labor activists. At the national level, Meany and others held the increasingly radical peace movement in utter contempt. In New York City, resentment spilled over into violence on May 8, 1970, when construction workers—"hardhats" as they quickly became known—attacked anti-war protesters, demonstrating against Nixon's invasion of Cambodia.

Nixon hoped that his support for the war and overt appeals to working people might lure trade unionists into the Republican Party. Meany and most in organized labor were unmoved by the president's transparent efforts. But Meany and his supporters continued to believe in the war, and remained committed to their vision of the CVT as a democratizing force in Vietnam. When the economy, once robust with growth, began to show signs of weakness—caused in part by the expense of the war in Southeast Asia—the AFL-CIO did vigorously attack Nixon's erratic efforts to promote recovery. Still, on the issue of Vietnam, the AFL-CIO could always be counted on to support the president.

As in the United States, economic problems also afflicted South Vietnam. Nixon's Vietnamization plan—



Hunter P. Wharton, president of the Operating Engineers (tallest individual); Ben Sharman, International Affairs Representative, Operating Engineers (back row, wearing conventional eyeglasses); Morris Paladino, Asian American Free Labor Institute (wearing sunglasses); and Joseph Davis, president, Washington State AFL-CIO (wearing sunglasses and carrying coat) meeting with Vietnamese dock workers and dedicating a hiring hall for the port of Saigon to replace the old hiring system dominated by gangsters and corrupt government officials, July 1973. Also during their visit to Vietnam, the AFL-CIO delegation put pressure on President Thieu to release jailed unionists.

in which South Vietnamese troops gradually were to replace American forces—meant a slowing of U.S. investment, financial support that had created the bubble upon which the CVT built much of its support. Unemployment became an increasing problem for the CVT. South Vietnamese unions, after many years of successes, began losing strikes. Labor-state relations, while an improvement over 1968, remained far from ideal. Privately, Buu complained endlessly that President Thieu had no social vision nor sense of how organized labor might strengthen the struggling country. Meanwhile, the war

entered a dangerous new phase. The Viet Cong, frustrated by setbacks, launched a terror campaign. On September 21, 1971, two kilos of VC-planted dynamite rocked CVT headquarters where Buu lived in a small apartment. The CVT president narrowly escaped with his life.¹⁴

As the election of 1972 approached, the AFL-CIO leadership faced the unhappy choice between an untrustworthy president, whose domestic policies they despised and the anti-war candidacy of Senator George McGovern, whose election would doom any hopes for the future of the labor federation in South Vietnam. To complicate matters, that same summer in St. Louis, a group of unionists opposed to the war held a convention and established an organization called Labor for Peace. In the end, the AFL-CIO avoided endorsing a presidential candidate but several unions did split with the leadership and formed the National Labor Committee for the Election of McGovern-Shriver.

After McGovern's overwhelming defeat, the American economy slid into a deep recession the following year, one marked by a frightening stagflation—rising inflation and unemployment. Mutual distrust marred labor's relationship with the Nixon administration, but liberals in Congress distanced themselves from the federation due to the war issue. The AFL-CIO carefully mapped out a full-employment-based recovery plan, but few were listening.

In January 1973, Nixon announced that he had finally achieved "peace with honor." In Vietnam, however, Buu recognized that "peace with honor" was hardly what Nixon was offering his country; still he hoped that the American withdrawal would finally allow South Vietnam to escape the specter of being America's puppet. With the departure of the Americans, Buu talked of an "awakening of the conscience of the masses"—his hope that the indifferent and long-suffering peasants and workers of Vietnam would rally to the anti-communist cause—now that it was no longer tainted by the overwhelming presence of the Americans.¹⁵

The American withdrawal, however, also meant a severe erosion of American leverage over the South Vietnam state—support that had often protected the CVT. Well aware of this, Meany arranged a personal meeting with President Thieu during the South Vietnamese

president's state visit to Washington in March 1973. At the Blair House meeting, Meany subtly but clearly explained that his support for continuing appropriations for South Vietnam (the AFL-CIO was one of the few political forces still behind American aid) depended on Thieu's treatment of the CVT. The South Vietnamese president seemed to understand.¹⁶

In the months that followed, however, Thieu tightened control over his country. That summer, in response to a labor strike, Thieu imprisoned several labor leaders, including the presidents of four major unions. Again the AFL-CIO attempted to pressure the state department, but the American government had lost much of its influence. Finally, Meany dispatched a high-profile AFL-CIO delegation to Saigon to negotiate the release of the jailed unionists. The group included Hunter Wharton, president of the Operating Engineers Union, Benjamin Sharman, the international affairs representative for the International Association of Machinists, and Morris Paladino, the new director of AAFLI. The delegation, meeting with Thieu, reminded the president of his promise to Meany. Thieu still insisted on bringing the labor leaders to trial and convicting them, but he later released the prisoners.¹⁷

Ironically, the CVT—despite problems with Thieu—was enjoying some real successes. South Vietnamese labor had lobbied for and helped implement the Land-to-Tiller Act—a far-reaching land redistribution program, aimed at shifting ownership of millions of acres from landlords to tenants. In addition, the CVT formed its own political party (in part to lobby for land reform). The CVT's Worker-Farmer Party managed to navigate the complicated and dangerous political waters of South Vietnam and make initial inroads.

But the hour was already too late. By early 1975, the North Vietnamese Army began a full-scale invasion of the south. South Vietnamese appeals for American aid fell largely on deaf ears in Congress, but the AFL-CIO still had enough clout to arrange meetings for Buu. He arrived in Washington, D.C. on March 15, 1975, for a desperate round of lobbying on behalf of his government and met with Senators Henry Jackson and Edward Kennedy in addition to President Gerald Ford in the White House. "Whatever you can do, do it quickly," pleaded Buu at the close of the meeting with Ford. But



Former Vietnamese tenant farmers examine the land titles to their new property, 1970. Pressured by the CVT and the AFL-CIO, the South Vietnam government had launched sweeping land reform covering three million acres. Unlike the communist approach to the distribution of property, the government provided landlords with some compensation.

aid was not forthcoming and probably would not have helped.¹⁸

In April, as South Vietnam began to topple, Meany contacted the U.S. Ambassador to Saigon, Graham Martin, to ask that CVT labor leaders be included in any evacuation plans.¹⁹ The end came sooner and more dramatically than Martin could have imagined. With North Vietnamese troops surrounding Saigon in late April, the evacuation plan finally was set in motion. Endangered CVT officers and their families were to gather at an appointed site and time, board buses, and be transported

to the Saigon airport. But when the evacuation order finally came, the invading troops had destroyed the airport. There was only room for Buu in the helicopter airlift from the U.S. embassy. The rest of the CVT officers were to be left behind. Miraculously, the American embassy labor attaché, Emil Lindahal—who before entering state department service was a member of IUE Local 450, Long Island—managed to find a boat in Saigon harbor willing to take the group. In the last desperate hours of South Vietnam, the CVT members drifted out into the South China Sea. On board, they listened to radio reports announcing the fall of Saigon and, ominously, heard many of their names read as among those ordered to report to the authorities. After three days, the group arrived in the Philippines and eventually made their way to a refugee encampment in Guam. There, the CVT officers and their families were reunited with Buu. The group later moved on to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas,



GEORGE MEANY MEMORIAL ARCHIVES, #1682

John Eisenhower (far left), son of the former president and chairman of President Gerald Ford's Advisory Committee on Refugees; labor community services representatives; and Pennsylvania state officials visit the Vietnamese refugee center in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, temporary home to 11,500 individuals, September 1975. George Meany served on the Presidential Advisory Committee and the AFL-CIO took a lead in helping resettle thousands of refugees throughout the United States.

where AAFLI and the AFL-CIO Department of Community Services worked to find them sponsors in the United States. Trade unionists to the end, one of the first tasks for the group in Arkansas was to organize into committees to delegate duties, represent interests, and air grievances.²⁰

The fall of Saigon, however, did not bring an end to the war for American labor. With thousands of Vietnamese refugees flowing into the United States at a time when unemployment was edging upwards toward 10%, many Americans resented the added burden—especially after the painful war. But the AFL-CIO insisted that a debt was owed. Meany accepted a high-profile position on the seventeen-member presidential advisory committee on resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. He also committed the AFL-CIO Community Services Department to helping with the resettlement, dedicated federation

funds to the cause, and asked all federation locals and affiliates to help in finding jobs for the refugees. As if the nightmare of Vietnam would never end, some employers began hiring Vietnamese refugees as strikebreakers. Meany angrily threatened to resign from the presidential advisory committee unless the White House took action, which was quickly forthcoming.²¹

Members of the CVT who were not lucky enough to escape Vietnam paid a high price for their union activities. Many spent long years in “reeducation camps.” Today, there is no free labor movement in Vietnam. Like many nations in the region, Vietnam seems to have combined the worst of capitalism and communism—resulting in some of the most exploitive labor conditions in the world.

Prior to the final fall of Vietnam, Meany reflected back over labor's longest war. In 1974 on the Dick Cavett television program, Meany, referring to his support of Johnson and Nixon on Vietnam, confessed, “If I’d known then what I know now I don’t think we would have backed them.” He later qualified his comments somewhat, explaining that while “the American people were not told the truth as to the actual conduct of the war, the prospects for Vietnamization, etc. . . my fundamental belief in the role of the United States as the chief defender of freedom has not changed one bit.”²² ■

NOTES

Edmund F. Wehrle is an assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. His recent publications include "A Good Bad Deal": John F. Kennedy, Averill Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1960-1962," *Pacific Historical Review* (August 1998) and "No More Pressing Task Than Organization in Southeast Asia": The AFL-CIO Approaches the Vietnam War, 1947-1964," *Labor History* 42 (August 2001). He is currently working on a book-length treatment of the AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War.

By far the best, most readable general account of the war is Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983) by an informed journalist who covered the war. Christian Appy, *Working-Class War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993) provides a profile of the 2.5 million American men who fought in Vietnam—80% of whom, according to Appy, came from "working-class" or poor families. The anti-war literature is voluminous. A recent overview of the movement in America, featuring a section on the clash between organized labor's hawks and doves is by University of Edinburgh, Scotland, historian Rhondi Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven, 1999). A useful account of the development of opposition to the Vietnam War among trade union leaders, written by a Marxist author with little sympathy for labor's "hawks" is Philip Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1989). Frank Koscielski, *Divided Loyalties: American Unions and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1999) focuses on the plight of members of UAW Local 600 during the war. For labor's leadership, see Archie Robinson, *George Meany and His Times* (New York, 1981) where the AFL-CIO president speaks of the CVT and of the pain caused by the war; also prominent labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein's *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, 1995) details Reuther's divided loyalties and angst

facing the war in Vietnam. For the most detailed account of the early interactions between American organized labor and the emerging trade union movement in Vietnam, see Edmund F. Wehrle "No More Pressing Task Than Organization in Southeast Asia": The AFL-CIO Approaches the Vietnam War, 1947-1964," *Labor History* 42 (August 2001), written by the author of this article.

¹Buu to President Johnson, 20 May 1964, 39/7 Irving Brown Papers, George Meany Memorial Archives (hereafter GMMA).

²*Free Trade Union News*, December 1950; John Brophy, *A Miner's Life*, (Madison, WI, 1964), p. 298; Irving Brown, "The Role of Labor in International Relations," 29 September 1950, 10/5, Brown Papers, GMMA.

³The best source on the early history of the CVT is Trinh-Quang-Quy, *Phong Trao Lao Dong Vietnam* (Saigon, 1970), a history of the South Vietnamese labor movement produced by the CVT on its twenty-fifth anniversary.

⁴*AFL News Reporter*, 13 July 1954.

⁵Eggers' reports from Vietnam can be found in the papers of the Office of Labor Affairs, Labor Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948-1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter NA).

⁶Irving Brown, "Report on Vietnam Trip," 17-21 November 1961, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.

⁷Telegram from Embassy in Vietnam to Department of State, 24 September 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1966, *Vietnam 1964*, 1:787.

⁸Rusk to Saigon Embassy, October 13, 1964, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy files, Labor and Manpower, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA.

⁹*Proceeding of the Sixth Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, San Francisco, CA, December 9-12, 1965*, pp. 560-67.

¹⁰For the details of the Saigon strike and subsequent Tet Offensive, I relied on reports from the *Saigon Post*, the *Saigon Daily News*, and records from Central Foreign Policy Files, Viet S, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA.

¹¹AFL-CIO Executive Council Statement, "The Sharpened Crisis in Vietnam," 20 February 1968. Lovestone to Meany, 7 February 1968, box 379, Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institute, Palo Alto, CA (hereafter Hoover).

¹²Minutes of the Labor Advisory Committee on Foreign Assistance, 11 March 1968, box 594, Papers of Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, General Records of the Department of Labor, RG 174, NA. Fernand Audie to Lovestone, 16 March 1968, 31/8, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA; *Saigon Post*, 14 March 1968.

¹³"Keynote Address of Jacob S. Potofsky: A Time To Speak Out, ACWA Convention, May 25, 1970," box 184, ACWA Papers, Kheel Center for Labor Documentation, Cornell University.

¹⁴*Saigon Post*, 21 September 1971; *New York Times*, 22 September 1971. Tiziano Terzani, *Giai Phong! The Fall of and Liberation of Saigon* (New York, 1976), p. 165. VC agent Nguyen Huu Thai confessed to

journalist Tiziano Terzani that his cell had been responsible for two attempts on Buu's life.

¹⁵"Press Conference," 19 November 1969, box 429, Lovestone Papers, Hoover.

¹⁶Memorandum, "AFL-CIO Talk with Thieu," 7 April 1973, box 1433, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-1973, RG 59, NA. Goldberg to Meany, 18 September 1973, box 518, Lovestone Papers, Hoover.

¹⁷Goldberg to Meany, 18 September 1973, box 518, Lovestone Papers, Hoover; Joel Seagall, "Memorandum for the Secretary, Subject: Your Meeting with Minister Hien of South Vietnam," 5 November 1973, box 48, General Records of the Department of Labor, Office of James D. Hodgson, RG 174, NA. Author's interview with Benjamin A. Sharman, Rockville, Maryland, 11 June 1997.

¹⁸"Memorandum of Conversation," 25 March 1975, box A1, Kissinger and Scowcroft Temporary Parallel Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

¹⁹Graham Martin to Meany, 11 April 1975, 63/14, Meany Papers, GMMA.

²⁰Author's interview with Vy Pham, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 30 June 2001; *Free Trade Union News*, (May 1975).

²¹Julia Vadala Taft to Ford, 15 August 1975, WHCF, ND 18-2, box 65, Ford Library; Perlis to Meany, 15 August 1975, 68/20, Meany Papers, GMMA; *Denver Post*, 15 August 1975.

²²Meany to Mark Stone, 1 December 1975, 68/20, Meany Papers, GMMA.